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The
GREAT EXPECTANCY

MARGARET
PRESCOTT
MONTAGUE





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THE GREAT EXPECTANCY

THE GREAT EXPECTANCY

BY

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"HOME TO HIM'S MUVVER," "OF WATER AND THE SPIRIT,"
"TWENTY MINUTES OF REALITY," ETC.



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PUBLISHERS' NOTE

The Great Expectancy made its first public appearance in the columns of *The Atlantic Monthly* as one of a series of papers about the effect of the War on a secluded southern valley.

The special message which it holds seemed to make its publication in some more permanent form desirable.

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BY MARGARET PRESCOTT MONTAGUE

YESTERDAY we had our Sunday-school picnic. We have one every year, and heretofore they have all floated down the tide of memory, hardly distinguishable one from another, in a medley of green trees, fried chicken, boys and girls, toddling babies, and old people. But this one was different. I shall always remember it on account of old Aunt Livy. It so happens that three of our

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four volunteers come from different branches of the same family, and all are Aunt Livy's great nephews. They were at home for the picnic from nearby training-camps, very gay and self-conscious in their khaki, and were soon to leave us, first for larger training-camps, and then for France. And while they strutted about and drilled the girls in their Red Cross costumes, Aunt Livy sat under the green trees and wept all alone, and everybody pretended not to notice. We did not want to see the tears, we wanted to think that war was just smart uniforms, and pretty Red Cross girls, and picnics; and so, when Aunt Livy, in her bright purple dress and her hat with its black plume nodding gro-

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tesquely down over her eyes, said, 'He's my little nephew,' and, 'Well, write ef you kin,' mopping her eyes and her trembling mouth with a big old hand, because she had lost her handkerchief, we all tried to slip away from her. But I shall always see that picnic, with the boys and girls laughing together, and the babies meandering here and there, and in the background, poor Aunt Livy, with no one to comfort her, sitting all alone under the sugar-maples, trembling and old, weeping over her little nephews.

And now Christopher is dead, Christopher, who came all the way from England to our mountains seeking his fortune; Christopher, who

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shot ground-hogs, and rode, and fiddled, and sang 'John Peel' so gayly, and who sat at our dinner-table just before he sailed for home and the great adventure.

'Yes,' Maggie says, 'I kin see him now a settin' right here'—she indicates a special corner of the table,—
'an' he says, "Yes, when the war's over I'll come back an' give a lecture here in the church and tell you about fighting in France and everything."'

O, Christopher! If you would come back now and tell us all about everything, how breathlessly we should listen! But I like to think how happy you were just before you went. Down here in the West Virginia mountains, so far away from

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the great conflict, I suspect that you had known 'great thoughts of heart.' But once the decision was made, you won through to a great serenity and content; and one thinks of you only as young and gay and fortunate; for, in the old days,—such a short little time ago,—when we all made merry together, who ever thought that so many of you Englishmen were to be offered a place in the ranks of a great crusade, to have the glory of a very great enterprise?

And what of us who are left? Life has all at once become a very solemn and sacred thing. We cannot take it lightly any more, it is sanctified by the deaths of too many. It is a gift to us, something to be accepted

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gravely and reverently from dead hands, and to be lifted up to such high and shining levels, that the consecrated gift may be the medium through which the Great Expectancy may find its way into the world for its fulfillment.

Yes, war is here; it is staring at us through the boys' khaki, the girls' red crosses, and through old Aunt Livy's tears. But what next? What after the war?

Well, as the life of our valley breaks through its own narrow isolation and goes forth into the activities of a wider world, so all those activities are gathered up and enfolded in something else, something larger, something further on—and this some-

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thing seems to me to be what the Great Expectancy points to.

When I look back over the years, and seek to reconstruct my own past, I see it most often against the background of the Big Valley. I see myself seeking, hoping, and dreaming, under its trees, on the tops of its hills, and in the green pie-corners of its rail-fences; and certainly, if hopes and fancies and aspirations ever do have a resurrection, then, at the Day of Judgment, most of mine will arise and take wing out of the woods and fields and hillsides of the Big Valley in which they have so long lain asleep.

But the Great Expectancy, which was the chief among the dreams, is having a resurrection already—with-

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out waiting for the Judgment Day,—unless indeed that day is now upon us; and if it is to be born again, it shall be here in the Big Valley where it was first conceived, and where it went beside me, so constantly, albeit so elusively, through all those early days.

If I am doubtful of the good taste of the personal pronoun, I rejoice to think that there are other and bigger things in the world at present than good taste; life has surged up, and overflowed its dykes too far to be stagnated in the cockle-shells and silver bells of the small proprieties. Moreover, what I seek to offer through the narrow medium of self is, I know, a flood tide that is pouring

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itself into the world through many another channel of personality, and mine will be only one among many.

I came into the world with a Great Expectancy. Somewhere, sometime, something immense, something wonderful might happen while I was here. What the great event was to be, I did not know; I only knew a vague restlessness and waiting. Possibly I suspected that the existing order of things was not quite as permanent as older people appeared to think it. Amusingly enough, one of my earliest recollections is of myself trying to refute the gloomy statement of an older person that we all had to die, on the ground that the end of the world might come while some of us were

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yet alive, in which case we should be translated to heaven without the formality of death. For this contention I believe I had biblical authority to offer. But I was not allowed to offer it; I was told instead that, if I said such a silly thing again, I should be sent to bed; which of course was no argument, but was, I suppose, all that could be expected from elders living in a finished world.

My world, however, was not finished; it had not really begun, and I was waiting from moment to moment for the curtain to go up. I opened many a door, thinking that each might be the magic one that would give on the great adventure. And they all disclosed delightful bits of

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life, but they all stopped just short of what I was seeking. Perhaps I should never have felt that there was any big unseen thing afoot in the world—any romance just there behind the curtain—if I had not lived so close to nature. Some say that they are of Paul and some of Apollos, but I was, first of all, of the Big Valley, of its woods and its fields, its wide sky and its mountains. They lifted me out of the littleness of self, and what they first suggested, Paul and Apollos, Wordsworth and Blake later on elaborated. There was always a certain adventure in going into the woods alone. When I pushed through the undergrowth and emerged under the trees, as the bushes swung to be-

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hind me, intangible doors closed on
the outer world and inner doors
opened. If I could not exactly say
with Wordsworth,—

There was a time when meadow, grove and
stream
The earth and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,—

at least I constantly expected that I
might see them thus. There was al-
ways a chance that that something
else that was there might drop its cur-
tain of woods and grass and birds,
and suddenly stand forth revealed. I
hoped and feared that some day I
might meet Pan.

Later I pursued this will-o'-the-

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wisp of expectancy through many other things. That was after Nature, my first love, had begun somewhat to relax her hold, knowing full well, the wise old woman, that she had set her image and superscription upon my heart forever; knowing that, no matter how occupied the rest of me might be, there would always be a little sentinel of love deep within me, who could never see any of her merry children, bird, bee, or blossom, without answering with a gay and affectionate salute.

But while Nature had awakened love and drawn me ever on a quest of wonder and reverence that was outside of my own small self, the other things too often played on vanity

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with extravagant promises. Well, I never really believed them; for, when one grows up with mountains rather than molehills against which to measure one's self, one's importance becomes amusingly small. Indeed, 'Why so hot, little man?' But at last I grew weary of the chase, deciding that if there were any great adventure it was not in the mirage of the just beyond, but rather in a clearing of the inner vision by a passionate devotion to the least and simplest events of everyday life. In which reflection I was no doubt nearer to clutching the hem of Truth's garment than I had been at any time since childhood, when Nature, through the medium of the Big Valley, sought so

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tenderly and so charmingly to open my eyes.

So, like a spectator at the play, I had come early, and waited so long for the performance to begin, that I had almost dropped asleep in my chair, when suddenly, with a crash, the curtain flew up on a drama so amazing, so titanic, so overwhelming, that one's very breath was snatched away in horror. In the wink of an eye we beheld the old stable world that we knew go up in fire and smoke—vanish like the snows of yesteryear.

'Just think,' commented a friend of mine, looking at two little girls of five and six, 'these children will not be able to remember what the world was like before the war.' No, that

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is past history now. Where are those old years of 1911, 1912, 1913? They seem ages away across there in the sunshine of the past, with a black chasm yawning between us. Never did history leap so abruptly from one epoch to another. Some of us do not even yet realize the change. We think that when peace returns, the old world as we knew it will return with it. And in that hope we are still trying to pull the remnants of that old world up over our ears to shut out the tremendous footfalls of the oncoming new. We think to placate the ravenous times with little sops of service, a little knitting, a little patriotism, a little Red Cross work, as if one sought to defend one's

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self with a knitting-needle against the Kingdom of Heaven. Like the man in the parable, we had built snug material barns, and thought ourselves safe, when suddenly God said, 'Thou fool, this night is thy soul required of thee.'

Can Fate be moving toward such an overwhelming event, just there behind the curtain of human sight, and no one in the world have any prescience of it? Did not the coming events cast their shadows before in all the wild restlessness of the first years of the century? And did not some of us perhaps invite ourselves into life for this very period? Since time immemorial there has been the belief that the spirit, before it enters the

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world, pulling the dark veil of time and matter over the eyes, has chosen its entry with a foreknowledge of what that period in life is to hold. What if some of us came into the world for the very sake of these tremendous times? Can this be true? Who knows? Not I, at least. I know only that, if it were true, when we got back to the other side, and stood at the crossroads of eternity, where we could look both forward and back, we should be deeply humiliated if, when the great events which we had sent our spirits forth to meet had arrived, they had so overwhelmed us that we went down into despair before them, instead of meeting them with courage and high hearts, and

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weaving out of them some great redemption.

I would not force the idea either that the Great Expectancy which invited me through all the early years—as it doubtless invites most young people—was any veiled prophecy of the coming of a world-war. But one begins now to hope that that expectancy, which was no doubt the spirit groping through the dark, may yet out of all this world-agony come to a fuller realization. Shall nothing spiritual be born for the world out of all this grief? Shall old Aunt Livy weep all alone for her little nephews, in vain; and Europe be crucified for no resurrection?

We have been like bewildered mar-

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iners swept by a dark tidal wave out of all our bearings, and, like the sailors of Columbus, we too at times have been mutinous with fear.

They sailed and sailed as winds might
blow,

Until at last the blanched mate said:

'Why, now not even God would know,
Should I and all my men fall dead.

These very winds forget their way,
For God from these dead seas is gone.

Now speak, brave Admiral, speak and
say—'

He said: 'Sail on! sail on! and on!'

And well, indeed, has it been for any of us who could hear a brave voice crying through the dark, 'Sail on, and on,' for now at length that voice begins to be justified. In 1914, the old world, as we knew it, sud-

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denly became without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep; but now we begin to believe that all the time the spirit of God was moving upon the face of the waters, and that presently He shall say, 'Let there be light.'

The first act of the great drama was war and blood and destruction, and the second act was the same, more agony, more grief, terror, and destruction; but now there begins to be a great hope flaring through the darkness in many different quarters, and the voices of watchmen set upon towers begin to cry the glimmer of daybreak. Perhaps the world sailing a dark track has all along been headed toward a great con-

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summation—'Time's burst of dawn.'

One holds no brief for war. This new thing was knocking at the doors of the world before 1914, and no one can say whether the war has hastened or retarded its entry; but perhaps it was inevitable that the old world of the materialist, topheavy with its overweening pride, should, like the devil-possessed swine of the Scriptures, rush violently down a steep place to its own destruction, and in the throes of its titanic suicide pull the rest of the world temporarily down with it. Moreover, when man is well and prosperous and full of himself, there seems to be little room for God; but when his prosperous

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world comes suddenly to an end, it leaves within him a vacuum of despair, into which the Spirit may pour itself. Perhaps also we hold too cheaply beliefs for which we are never called upon to die. The early Christians did not take their faith lightly—they knew that at any moment they might have to offer their lives for it, and a thing that one dies for is a precious thing. We had forgotten that we could die for ideals, and when enough have fought and bled, those who are left may accept from their hands, with a stricken reverence, the hyssop of Eternal Truth, seeing how very deep it has been dipped in the sacrificial blood.

Some look for a furtherance of de-

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mocracy out of this great conflict, and some for a brotherhood among the nations; but others again look for something more—a fuller incarnation of the Spirit. I could quote many passages from late books and from magazine articles giving voice to this expectancy, but I will take instead the words of a blacksmith—not, it is true, of the Big Valley, but of this state, at least.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘there’s something new comin’—you can sorter feel it in the air.’

The first sight is the difficult sight. When one goes into the spring woods to look for hepaticas, at first the woods are gray and dead. At last the eye lights upon a single clump of

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blossoms, and then, the sight being cleared, as it were, by this one cluster, suddenly one perceives that the woods are full of bloom. The eye must be attuned to hepaticas; so also the inner vision needs its adjustment as well. But catch one glimpse of this great expectancy, and suddenly one realizes that it is bursting forth in every direction. It is the young people who have the quick, the fresh eye; their sight has not been too long accustomed to the old things. And it is natural that they should be the first to offer a response to the oncoming of the Spirit. They have not been blind to the terror and awfulness of the time, they have seen the dark-

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ness of the tower, they have dared the worst,—

In a sheet of flame
I saw them and I know them all, and yet
Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set,
And blew, 'Childe Roland to the dark
tower came.'

They are the children of the new generation, they are seeing something that their elders cannot always glimpse.

'They have rediscovered the secret of the Ages of Enthusiasm,' says Maurice Barrès. 'By this token they are more complete natures than we, and come nearer to fulfilling the type of man made perfect.' And earlier in the same essay, he says, 'In these young men is taking place a resurrec-

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tion of our most glorious days. Some great thing is about to come into being.' And again, 'Have you noticed that they speak constantly of God—that they pray?'

'Some great thing is about to come into being.'

'There's something new comin'—you kin sorter feel it in the air.'

Blacksmiths in West Virginia, and Member of the French Academy echo each other. All over the world there is this feeling, this stir of expectancy,—

Waiting to see some wonder momentarily
Grow out, stand full, fade slow against the
sky.

Yet they are careful not to formu-

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late the hope beyond expectancy. Remembering Christ's admonition against the pouring of new wine into old bottles, they await the outpouring of this new wine, not anticipating it, or insisting that it shall go into any old inflexible bottle of the past, but offering to it instead the humble and passionate receptacle of a broken and a contrite heart.

The herald of the times displays a black scroll, but it is shot through with a transcendent gleam, a hope that cries to humanity for a great service, a great faith, and a great surrender. Shall not this be our gift: that we in America offer to all the gallant young men who have died for the cause of righteousness, a solemn

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consecration and dedication of our hopes to the Great Expectancy? And bringing what treasures of gold and frankincense and myrrh our souls possess, pay a passionate tribute to their heroic memories in a high-hearted devotion to the blazing hope of the hour.

If we can make answer in some such way, then indeed may we have confidence that none of old Aunt Livy's tears have been wasted, that none of the unutterably dear and brave Christophers of the world have been offered up in vain. These last have in very truth, like their prototype, been the Christ-bearers to the world; and as that Christopher of old carried the mysterious Child through

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the raging torrent, so they, breasting a darker and more dreadful flood, have brought his shining spirit back into the world and presented it to humanity at this most solemn Time. Shall we fail, then, to accept their poignant gift with anything short of the complete surrender of soul and body?

What does the future hold? Agony, death and war, no doubt, but also our own souls, God, and the Great Expectancy.



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